



GATEWAYS TO ENGLISH

CURRENT HUNGARIAN DOCTORAL RESEARCH

EDITED BY
TIBOR FRANK AND
KRISZTINA KÁROLY

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Venetian well-heads may not strike the modern researcher as objects of any special importance that are rooted, as basic parts in the water-system, in everyday life. Instead, these works of art are mostly displayed in museums, or can be found in public and private collections, mainly from the United States, Europe and Russia. Many well-heads have been destroyed or lost. Surviving examples are, in many cases, deprived of their original function, and are used for decorative purposes, for example, as flowerpots in representative private gardens or parks. This loss of function poses several problems for the researcher, which renders the actual historical investigation all the more difficult.

The aim of this essay is to show how the growing cult of Venice contributed to the emergence of well-heads in Anglo-American literature, and to the development and re-animation of the related branch of art-trade in the 19th century. First, I shall consider travel journals and other literary works; then, I shall examine copies, forgeries, and the activity of John P. White in 19th and 20th century art trade. Lastly, I will present three well-heads in detail which have been thought to be lost or have not been analysed in the context of Venetian carvings.

Researching well-heads, in the beginning, was often connected to com-

VENICE IN ENGLAND AND AMERICA: WELL-HEADS AS COLLECTIBLES AND THE GRAND TOUR¹

Anna Tüskés

¹ My gratitude is due to Professor Ernő Marosi, who has been supervising and supporting my research done at the doctoral school of the Institute of Art History, Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest.

mercial activities. During the 19th century, those who studied well-heads were mostly sculptors and art-dealers, as well as art historians sent to Venice from foreign countries as agents for various museums. They wrote short specialized articles and reports on the artefacts considering their origin, typology, or stylistic changes.

In the 20th century, since the publication of Ferdinando Ongania's collection of photographs of well-heads in 1889, more and more researchers turned to these Venetian artefacts. Many monographs dedicated to Venetian plastic art published during the last decades also include well-heads. While interest in well-heads has



Figure 1 Well-head in the "Renaissance" garden, Holmhurst St. Mary House, Sussex.
Illustration of Hare's *The Story of my Life*

not abated, and newer and newer pieces are being discovered, a comprehensive analysis of medieval and Romanesque well-heads in the context of Venetian masonry (which would also take into account Byzantine and Western European specimens) still awaits to be compiled. The collection of Ongania, which was re-published in an abbreviated form in 1911, still serves as an invaluable documentation of well-heads that have since disappeared.

Let me start summarizing the development of the cult of Venice by providing an overview of its emergence in the context of the history of the city. The Venetian Republic, which was dissolved by

the Treaty of Campo Formio in 1797, became part of Austria until 1866 excepting shorter periods (1805-1813, 1848-1849). Of the four attributes of Venice of early modern times—rich, wise, just, and the “città galante”—the first and fourth remained, while the middle two ceased to describe the city, and, during the first half of the 19th century, the myth of the unconquerable Venice was replaced by a romantic cult (Norwich, 2006).

Even before it was deprived of its independence, Venice became part of the Grand Tour, a traditional journey that appeared during the second half of the 17th century. Members of the English nobility sojourned in the city for shorter or longer periods in order to return with a couple of Canalettos (Redford, 1996: 14). While it was mainly young men of the British upper class and their companies that participated in the Grand Tour, elder people, women, and common people also undertook the travel, even if a somewhat shortened version (Black, 1998). Myriads of published travel journals were prompted by their experiences.

Scrutinizing surviving texts in a chronological order can be a very efficient method of tracing the main stages of the Venice-cult. It was sometime during the second half of the 17th century that the cult appeared among English travelers; the adoration of Venice is conspicuously missing from earlier travelogues.

Regarding literary works in the strict sense, it can be suggested that while Venice inspired a large number of texts, for example, by Lord Byron, Thomas Otway, Ann Radcliff, Friedrich von Schiller, and Shakespeare, among others who chose the city as the setting of their works (Tanner, 1992), well-heads make few appearances in their texts. The main Venetian motifs that do appear are the Bucentaur, the carnival, the gondolas, the Bridge of Sighs, the Doge's Palace, the four horse statues of St Mark's Basilica, the Lido, the palaces, the prisons, the churches, and the Doges.

Travelogues, on the other hand, offer more information for the researcher. One of the notable English participant of the Grand Tour is John Evelyn, who did make a stop at Venice. He provided a detailed description of his experiences there between June 1645 and May 1646.

Evelyn, who later studied anatomy at the University of Padua, relates his admiration for the city built on water and its water supply on the very first page of his description of his arrival to Venice from Rome:

And this Citty, for being one of the most miraculously plac'd of any of the whole World, built on so many hundred Islands [...] deser[v]'d our admiration: It has neither fresh, nor any other but salt Water, save what is reserved in Cisterns, of the raine, & such as is daily brought them from Terra firma in boates. (Evelyn, 1959: 220)

He mentions the two well-heads in the court when describing the Doge's Palace:

[...] we were carried to see the private Armorie of the Palace, and so to the same Court we first Enter'd, nobly built of polish'd white Marble, part of which being the Dukes Court pro Tempore, there are two Wells, adorn'd with incomparable Work in Copper. (Evelyn, 1959: 226)

Depicting the Venetian Arsenal, he also makes mention of a peculiar well-head:

Another hall is for the meeting of the Senat: passing a Graft, are the Smiths forges, where they are continually at work on Ankers & Iron work: Neere it a Well of fresh Water which they impute to two Rhinoceros's hornes which they say lie in it, & will preserve it from even being empoison'd. (Evelyn, 1959: 231)

After finishing his studies at Padua, Evelyn travelled to Milan. His journal kept during his 11-month stay at Venice is one of the most important documents of early Grand Tours.

The works of art and social critic, writer, and scholar John Ruskin had an enormous influence the poets, writers and tourists of the 19th century. In *The Stones of Venice* published first in 1851-1853 in three volumes he mentions two well-heads: in the chapter on the San Marco he touches upon a now unidentifiable

well-head standing near the Campo San Moisè, decorated by a pointed coat of arms:

A yard or two farther, we pass the hostelry of the Black Eagle, and, glancing as we pass through the square door of marble, deeply moulded, in the outer wall, we see the shadows of its pergola of vines resting on an ancient well, with a pointed shield carved on its side; and so presently emerge on the bridge and Campo San Moisè, whence to the entrance into St. Mark's Place, called the Bocca di Piazza, (mouth of the square), the Venetian character is nearly destroyed, first by the frightful façade of San Moisè, which we will pause at another time to examine, and then by the modernizing of the shops as they near the piazza, and the mingling with the lower Venetian populace of lounging groups of English and Austrians. (Ruskin, 1904: 81-82)

The second mention of well-heads can be found in the chapter on the Doge's Palace where Ruskin alludes to the two bronze well-heads in the courtyard:

The long and narrow range of building, of which the roof is seen in perspective behind this angle, is the part of the palace fronting the Piazzetta; and the angle under the pinnacle most to the left of the two which terminate it will be called, for a reason presently to be stated, the Judgment angle. Within the square formed by the building is seen its interior court (with one of its wells), terminated by small and fantastic buildings of the Renaissance period, which face the Giant's Stair, of which the extremity is seen sloping down on the left. (Ruskin, 1904: 332)

In the one and a half decade following *The Stones of Venice*, the fate of Venetian well-heads in the art trade came to the turning point as more and more English travelers bought one or more pieces for their gardens in England.

Well-heads and Venice also played an important role in the life and work of the English writer Augustus John Cuthbert Hare, who

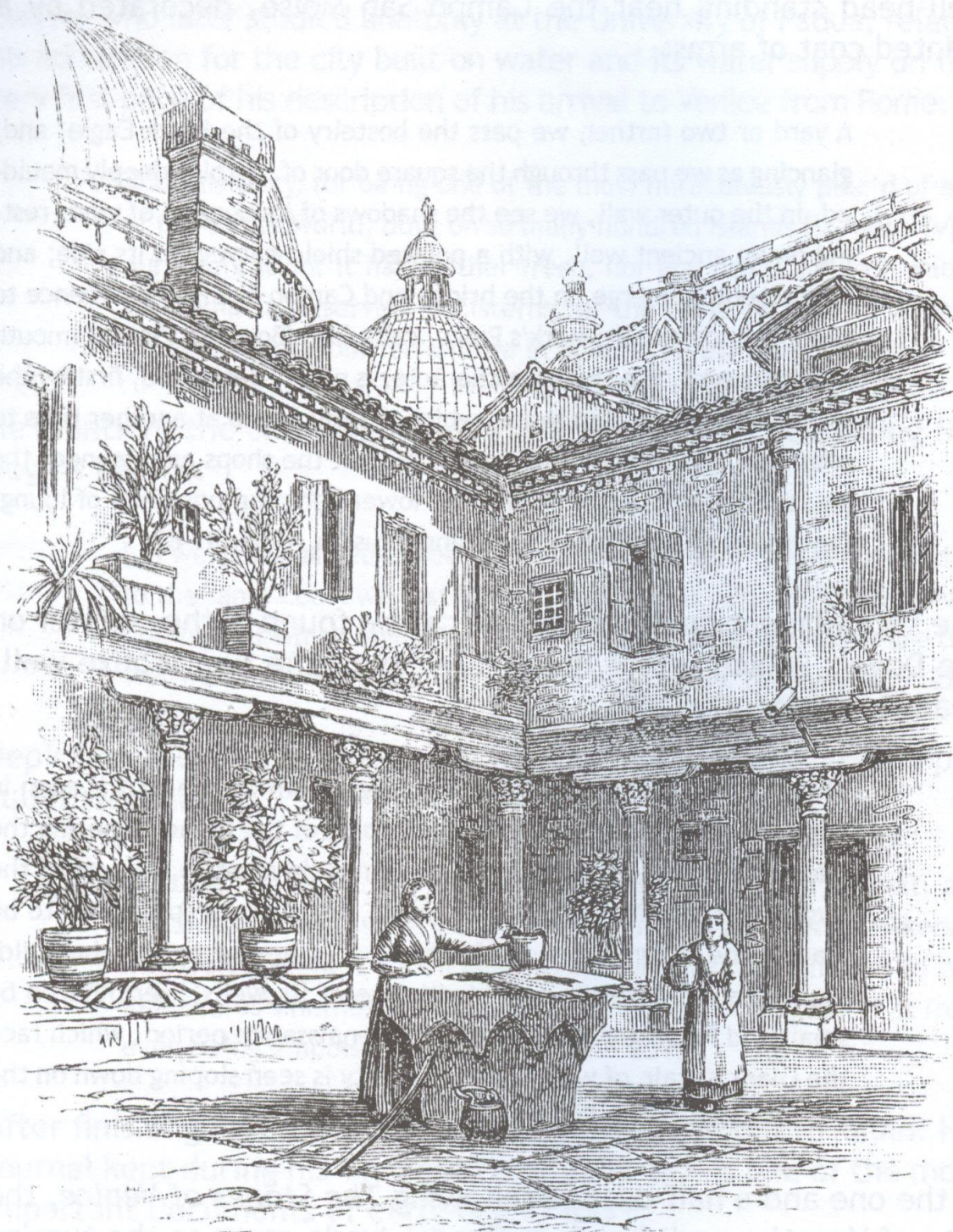


Figure 2 Well-head in the cloister of S. Gregorio's Monastery. Illustration of Hare's guidebook

often referred to the artifacts. He was fond of St. Jacob's well in the cloisters of St. John's Basilica in Rome and of St. Olaf's

well (Olaf II Haraldsson) in Norway. Venice can be considered to be one of the most important scenes of his life as he wrote a guidebook on the city, and he also bought two well-heads there placing them in the garden of the Holmhurst St. Mary house in Sussex, which he himself remodeled. One of them was in the Poultry Yard (Figure 6) (Hare, 1900: 5:31), while the other one was placed in the "Renaissance" garden specifically designed for this well-head (Figure 1) (Hare, 1900: 6:255). In his guidebook entitled *Venice* (1884), Hare dwells on well-heads several times. In the chapter containing introductory information he calls attention to the Antiquities Della Rovere where everything is on sale from the largest well-heads to the smallest lamps:

Antiquities. At the famous establishment of Della Rovere, formerly Marcato, 2277 S. Fosca, everything Venetian, from the largest *poz-zo* to the smallest lamp, may be obtained. Church-builders will do well to look here for their altars and ornaments. (Hare, 1896: 3)

After the description of the foundation of Venice and that of the arrival in the city, Hare mentions the well-heads again, whose number, according to him, had diminished because of the reconstructions and the increasing art trade from the second quarter of the 19th century:

Still, in 1814 there were 5000 well-heads in Venice; in 1856 only 2000. Now only 17 of the earliest or Italo-Byzantine period remain, and nearly half of these are in the hands of antiquity dealers. Venice is always wishing to sell its birthright of art-treasures. (Hare, 1896: 13)

When describing the Doge's Palace, he does not fail to mention the two bronze well-heads of the court:

In the court are two magnificent well-heads (*puteali*) of bronze, one by *Niccolò de' Conti*, Director of the Foundries of the Republic (1556), the other by *Alfonso Alberghetti* (1559). (Hare, 1896: 49)

He also refers to the piece in the cloisters of the Abbazia di S. Gregorio and the well-heads in the collection of the Museo Correr standing in the court of the Fondaco dei Turchi. Among the latter he describes in detail the piece brought from Corte Bressana into the museum in 1883, which he also mentions later in connection with the well-head standing on the square in front of the Scuola di S. Marco:

The rich gothic doorway in the low wall beyond admits to the courtyard of the *Abbazia di S. Gregorio* (founded in 1342 by monks of S. Ilario, successors of those who had fled from the persecution of Ezzelino in 1247), now let in tenements, but indescribably picturesque, with its ancient central well of red marble. (Hare, 1896: 71-72)

A cloister opening upon the courtyard contains several old Venetian well-heads of extreme beauty—one dating from the ninth century. At the upper end is the glorious well-head from the Corte Bressana (Hare, 1896: 112).

In the adjoining Campo is a beautiful renaissance well of the sixteenth century with sporting amorini. Another much finer specimen of a well-head is an exquisite work, attributed to Bartolomeo Bon, recently moved from the adjoining Corte Bressana to the Museo Civico. (Hare, 1896: 148)

Moreover, he makes reference to the well-head standing in the middle of the Campo dell'Angelo Raffaele near the church of S. Sebastiano: "The well of S. Sebastiano was sculptured by Marco Arian, 1349; it is the only known work of the sculptor, who has left his name upon it" (Hare, 1896: 195). Nowadays it is already well known that Marco Arian did not sculpt the piece, but it was him who ordered its construction on the square in his will (Rizzi, 1992: 54, 250, 265). Among the carvings on the islands of the lagoon, Hare also refers to the well-head in the cloister of the Franciscan monastery S. Francesco del Deserto near to Torcello: "There are two cloisters, one with a beautiful arcade and well" (Hare, 1896: 259).

Almost half of the guidebook of Hare is constituted by quotations. His main sources are *The Stones of Venice* by Ruskin and

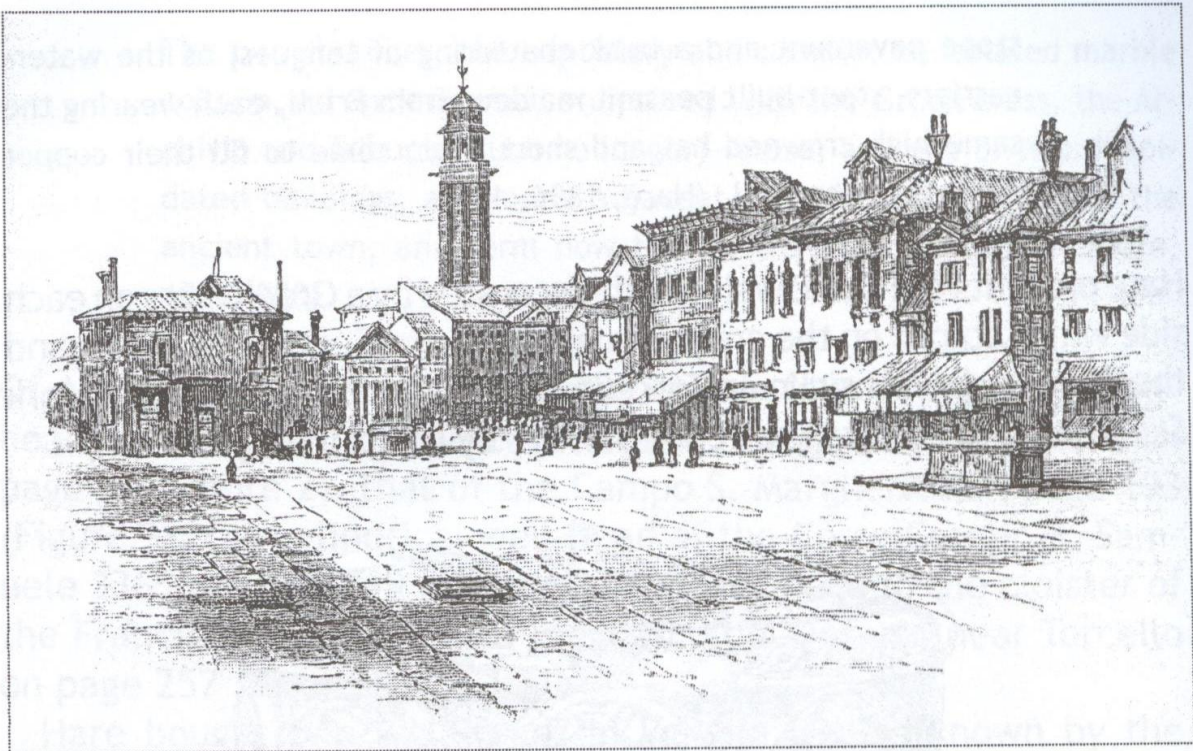


Figure 3 Well-head on the Campo S. Margherita. Illustration of Hare's guidebook

Voyage en Italie by Théophile Gautier. He refers to well-heads using quotations from other authors four times; he quotes the text cited above that mentions the carving near Campo San Moisè from Ruskin's book (Hare, 1896: 19). He also quotes passages on well-heads in general from the second volume of the book *Voyage en Italie* titled *Florence et Venise* by the French critic and historian Hippolyte Adolphe Taine (Hare, 1896: 16), and from a work of the English art critic and historian Julia Cartwright of which he did not provide the title:

Each of these squares is now a little centre of life, and has its farmacia and grocery and fruiterer's shop, perhaps a palazzo with the upper stories to let, sometimes a tree or two swaying leafy boughs against the balconies. Each has its well, generally raised on steps, round which the gossips of the place collect, and where you may gleam many a characteristic and amusing incident of Venetian life. Every morning at eight o'clock the iron lid which closes its mouth is unlocked, and then there is a clanking of heels on the

stone pavement and a brisk chattering of tongues, as the water-carriers, stout-built peasant maidens from Friuli, each wearing the same high-crowned hat and short skirt, come to fill their copper buckets at the well. (Hare, 1896: 168)

Hare presents the cubic well-head, decorated by a Greek cross on each side which stands on the grassy square between S. Fosca's Church and the Palazzo del Consiglio on Torcello quoting a passage from the work *Sketches of the History of Christian Art* by Lord Lindsay:

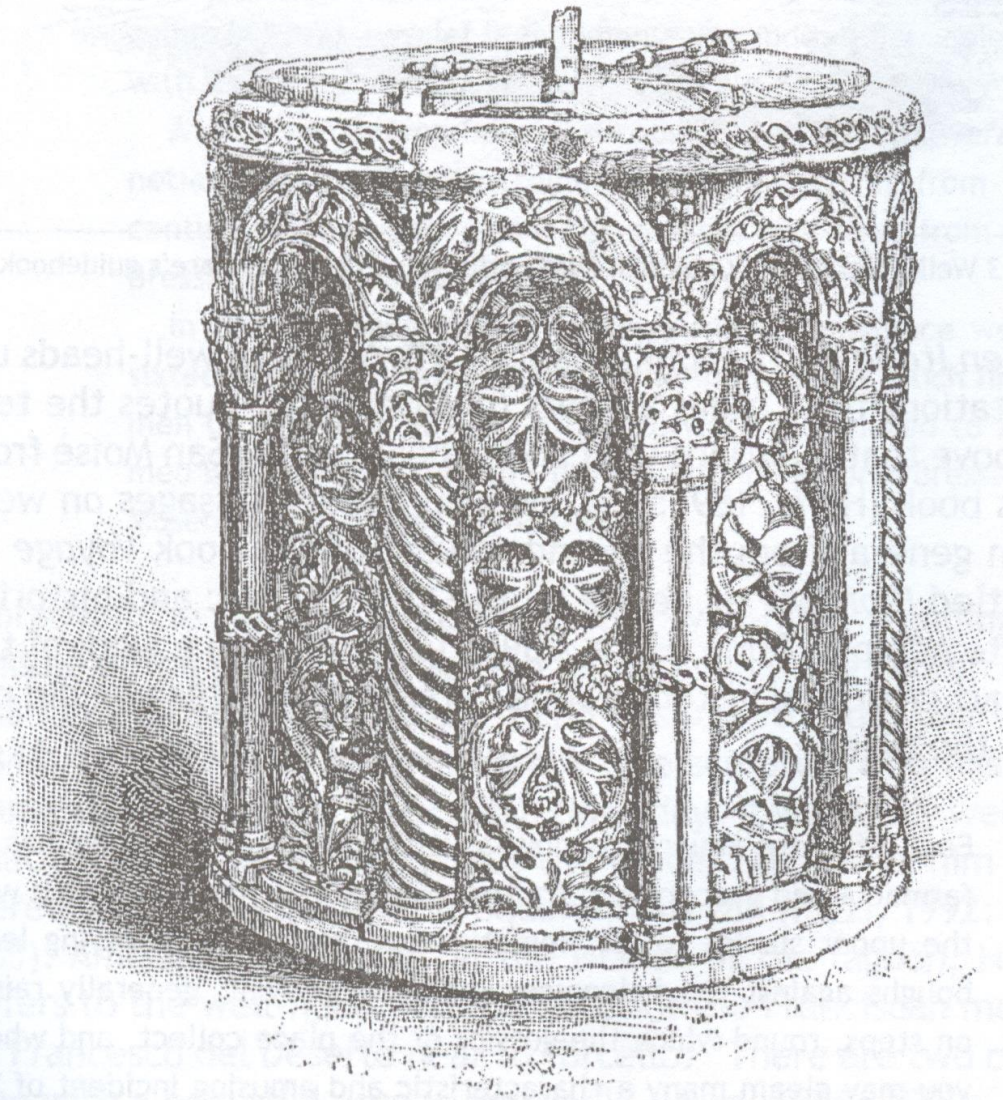


Figure 4 Well-head of the Corte Corner, S. Samuele 3365.
Illustration of Hare's guidebook

The two churches, the baptistery and steeple, an isolated marble column, an ancient well, sculptured with the Greek cross, the Archivio and Tribunal (such no longer)—these, and one or two dilapidated buildings, all closely adjacent, are the sole remains of the ancient town, and form now the centre of a wilderness. (Hare, 1896: 258)

Of the illustrations of Hare's guidebook four represents well-heads: the carving of the cloister of S. Gregorio's Monastery on page 72 (Figure 2), that of the Campo S. Margherita on page 193 (Figure 3), the cylindrical well-head of the Corte Corner, S. Samuele 3365 on page 219 (Figure 4), and the piece in the cloister of the Franciscan monastery S. Francesco del Deserto near Torcello on page 257 (Figure 5).

Hare bought two well-heads in Venice. One is known by the engraving in his book *The Story of My Life* only; the other is made of white marble, and he wrote in detail about its origin and its placement in his garden, with an illustration published in the same book. We know from his autobiography that he bought the well-head when it was no longer needed after a street had been created by the demolition of several houses between S. Moisè and S. Marco. Originally, the piece had been standing in the court of one of the demolished houses. Hare had it transported to England and it was this well-head that he placed in the middle of his "Renaissance" garden (Figure 1). On 15 August 1889, he wrote:

The little pathlet at the side winds with enticing shadows under the beech-trees, whilst the white marble Venetian well, covered with delicate sculpture of vines and pomegranates, standing on the little grassy platform, makes a point of refinement which accentuates the whole (Hare, 1900, vol. VI: 173).

In the centre is an early Venetian font or well head which came from one of the houses pulled down when the new street was made from S. Moisè to S. Marco. It is not later than 12th century. The steps on which it stands were made with the terrace and they were

not finished before I began to plant secums, veronicas, etc., in their interstices. (Hare, 1900, vol. VI: 173)

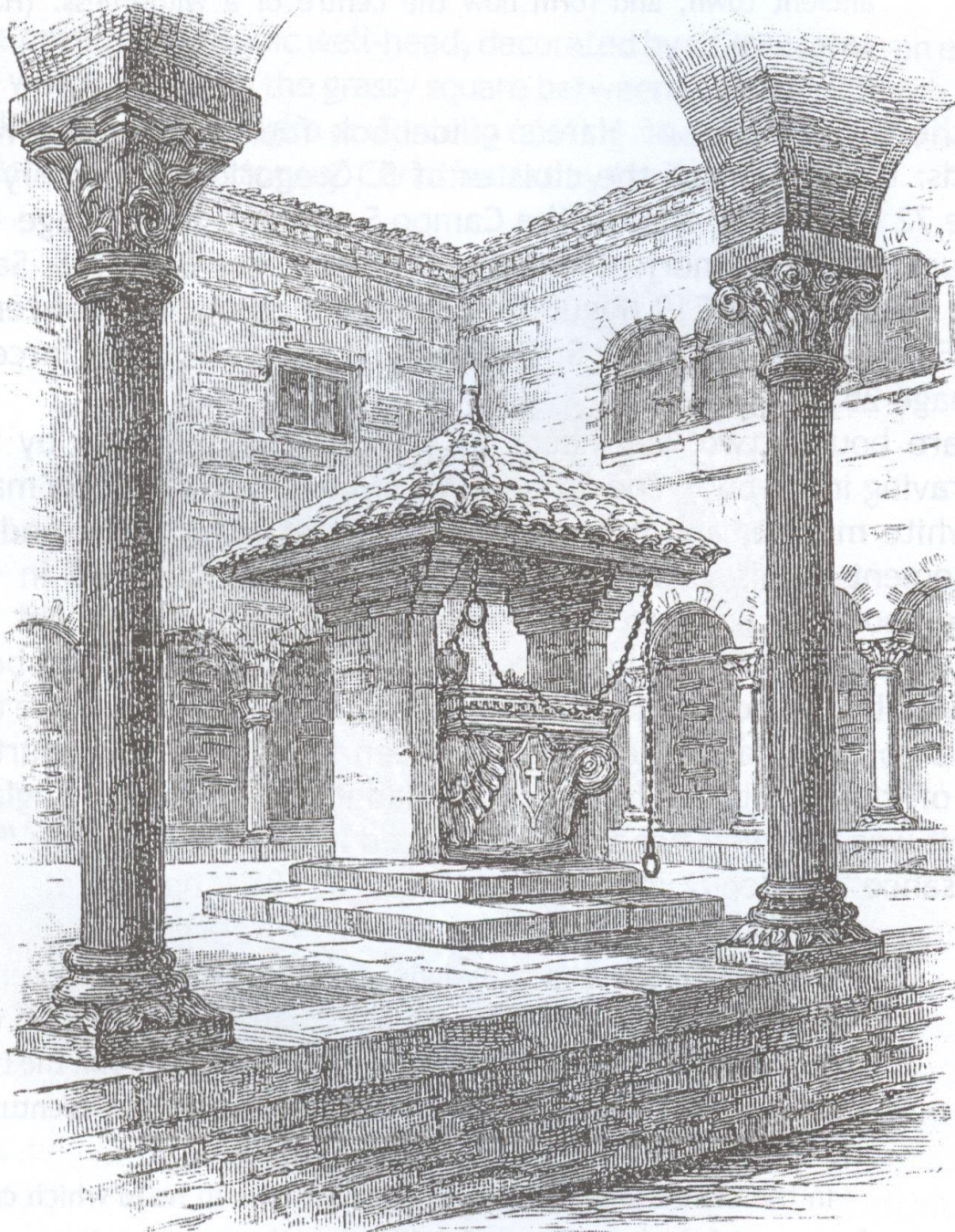


Figure 5 Well-head in the cloister of the Franciscan monastery S. Francesco del Deserto. Illustration of Hare's guidebook

This well-head still exists today in the court of the house, which was redecorated with carvings and copies bought by Hare from many parts of Europe. The other well-head once standing in the middle of the poultry yard has disappeared. According to its representation in the engraving (Figure 6), it belonged to a small group of Venetian cylindrical well-heads decorated by ogee arches. Heraldic motifs and ornaments appeared between the columns, while under the arches small flowers could be found. The well-head of Hare was also immortalized in 1761 by means of a painting by Jan Grevembroch for his manuscript (Figure 7), preserved today in the Biblioteca Correr (Grevembroch, 1761: XXXV).

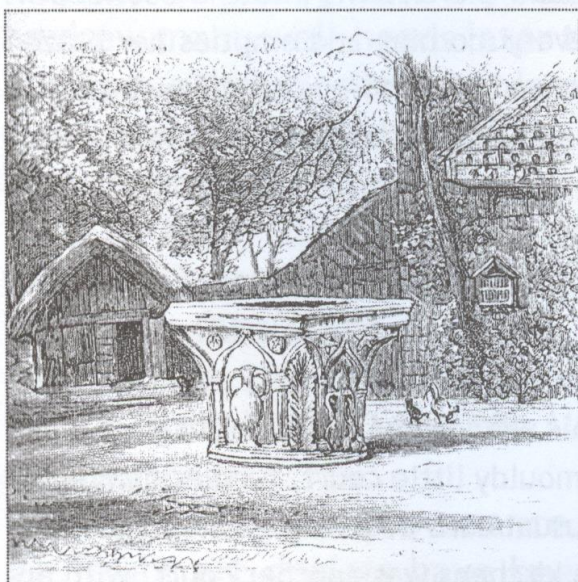


Figure 6 Well-head once in the Poultry Yard, Holmhurst St. Mary House, Sussex. Illustration of Hare's *The Story of My Life*

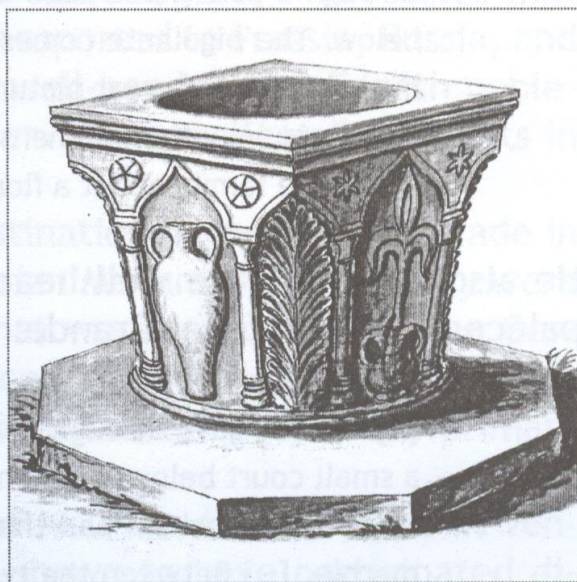


Figure 7 Well-head once. Painting by Jan Grevembroch

The author William Dean Howells, who was the consul of the United States of America in Venice, provides a detailed description of Venetian everyday life in his book entitled *Venetian Life*, published in 1866. The book contains frequent references to well-heads. He describes the rules of the use of well-heads, the work of water-carrier girls, and the workings of wells installed in public places:

But there were some things which must be brought to the house by the dealers, such as water for drinking and cooking, which is drawn from public cisterns in the squares, and carried by stout young girls to all the houses. These "bigolanti" all come from the mountains of Friuli; they all have rosy cheeks, white teeth, bright eyes, and no waists whatever (in the fashionable sense), but abundance of back. The cisterns are opened about eight o'clock in the morning, and then their day's work begins with chatter, and splashing, and drawing up buckets from the wells; and each sturdy little maiden in turn trots off under a burden of two buckets, one appended from either end of a bow resting upon the right shoulder. The water is very good, for it is the rain which falls on the shelving surface of the campo, and soaks through a bed of sea-sand around the cisterns into the cool depths below. The bigolante comes every morning and empties her brazen buckets into the great picturesque jars of porous earthenware which ornament Venetian kitchens; and the daily supply of water costs a moderate family about a florin a month. (Howells, 1891: 1:134-135)

He also mentions the well-heads in the two courts of a Gothic palace along the Canal Grande:

[A] hall [...] gave through Gothic windows of vari-colored glass, upon a small court below, a green-mouldy little court, further dampened by a cistern, which had the usual curb of a single carven block of marble. [...] Between the two kitchens was another court, with another cistern, from which the painter's family drew water with a bucket on a long rope, which, when let down from the fourth story, appeared to be dropped from the clouds, and descended with a noise little less alarming than thunder. (Howells, 1891: 2:247-248)

In sum, we can conclude that Venetian well-heads are not among the chief motifs of the city as represented in travel journals and literary works. Nonetheless, when mentioned, references are usually to the bronze well-heads of the court of the Doge's Palace. Two authors describe the well-head of the Arsenal, while in

other works, only general references can be found to well-heads installed in a particular palace, an ambulatory, or a public square. However, in texts from the 18th and 19th centuries inspired by Venice, the motif often surfaces, which may have contributed greatly to the growing interest in well-heads in the 19th century, and to the related branch of art trade emerging in this period.

There was a strong demand for Venetian well-heads during the second half of the 19th century from the newly established public collections in Europe and in the USA, from the upper classes, and from private collectors. According to two articles by Lorenzo Seguso written in 1859 and 1866, it was between 1840 and 1848 that the pillaging of Venetian gardens, courts, and public places reached its apex (1859: 31; 1866: 121). Seguso, who relates that he drew many well-heads later transported to Prussia, Russia, and England, attributes the mania of well-heads to an English nobleman, who discovered that they serve as excellent flower-pots in his London park.

Up to 1866, the immediate destination of most of the trade in well-heads was the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, where they were re-sold to Russia and to states that were later to form the German Empire. However, after Venice had become part of Italy, the British Isles, France, and the United States became the primary destinations.

Investigating the provenance of well-heads discovered in Venice, eight art dealers have been shown to have participated directly in the selling of the artworks: 1. Giovanni Marcato, whose warehouse served as a basis for the founding of The Venice Art Company, 2. Michelangelo Guggenheim, the founder and the first director of the first school of arts and crafts in Venice, 3. Francesco Pajaro, 4. Rietti, 5. della Torre, 6-7. Angelo and Lorenzo Seguso, father and son, sculptors, 8. Resimini. Researching their activities, however, poses special problems.

Demand for well-heads persisted even after patricians had sold their collections during the 19th century forced by an economic depression. This demand and the active trade, having drained the

collections of the nobility, encouraged the making of copies and forgeries of well-heads, and contributed to a strong connection between dealers and forgers and manufacturers of copies. Indeed, from the first half of the 19th century to contemporary times, Venice could be considered the emblematic city of forgers, in which forgery of artworks had become a widespread and regular activity.

It was Alberto Rizzi in his 1981 catalogue, who was the first to call attention to the unusually large number of forgeries and exact replicas of Venetian well-heads, which often bore motifs from other Venetian carvings as well as from well-heads of various ages.

It was this demand, emanating from England, that was supposed to be satisfied by John P. White, art dealer and owner of a factory of garden furniture and ornaments located in Bedford. His catalogue published in 1906 contains ample information regarding the material, shape, and size of the well-heads available from him. Pyghte Works, which was in operation between 1898 and 1939, offered copies of well-heads made of Istrian limestone and Rosso di Verona, a red marble, indicating the location of the original. The factory was converted into an airplane factory during World War II, but has since returned to its original profile after the war.

Identifying forgeries of well-heads can be based on six features: 1. Material. Until the 13th century well-heads in Venice were mostly made of Greek marble or Aurisian limestone. It was only later that carvers started to use Istrian limestone or Rosso di Verona. 2. Size. Medieval Venetian units of measure were no longer used or known in the 19th century. 3. Condition. The history of a piece is reflected by the way its surface is worn and the regularity of such marks. 4. Present-day location and placement. 5. Style. 6. Motifs. Carvers in the 19th century based their works on still known or published motifs, which may have been lost by our days. For this reason, it is worth scrutinizing other carvings from the 19th century. Also, a miscellany of styles and motifs is apparent in the works of masters inspired by sources of various types.

Many Venetian well-heads made their way to English and American private and public collections at the turn of the century. In-

stead of presenting the well-heads listed in the catalogue of the Victoria and Albert Museum (Pope-Hennessy, 1964: cat. 1, figs. 1-2), in the papers of Paul Hetherington (1980, 1985), or in the books of Barbara Israel (1999), Terence Hodgkinson (1970), and George Plumptre (1980), let me relate the perhaps more interesting fate of a well-head that has been thought to be lost for centuries, and present two other relics which have not been analyzed in the context of Venetian well-heads, but which bear motifs characteristic of their respective ages.

It was based on the work of Ongania (1911: fig. 45) that I was able to determine the provenance of a well-head that could not be traced after 1889 (Rizzi, 1992: 377-378). The cubic well-head thought to be lost since the publication of Ongania's collection was presented as a gift to the Cleveland Museum of Art by the John Huntington Art and Polytechnic Trust in 1916 (Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978). One of the sides of the early medieval well-head is ornamented by a Latin cross with widening ends embedded in an arcade. On both sides of the cross, two trees are placed below, and two rosettes above the arms. The arch, which connects the two columns with smooth shanks, is decorated by the motif of Vitruvian scrolls. The space above the arch is filled by two three-cusped leaves. The other side bears the motif of a diamond set between a larger and a smaller circle of a one-stranded band connected with twisted bands. A button occupies the inside of the smaller circle. The remaining space is filled with lanceolated leaves and three-cusped leaves in the corners and outside the circles. While the motif of the so-called tree of life, the Latin cross between trees and rosettes, appears on several 9th and 11th century well-heads, the motif appearing on the other side, characteristic of the 9th century, can be found on only one other piece that was in the property of art dealer Giovanni Marcato, and was seen and photographed for the last time by Ongania.

The gothic well-head in the park of the Villa Cimbrone in Ravello is cylindrical with an octagonal top decorated with lancet arches with three cusps. Its nearest parallel is the 14th-century well-head

in the court of St. Andrea in Venice (Rizzi, 1992: cat. 43, fig. 85). The well-head in Ravello was bought by art expert Ernest William Beckett, Lord Grimethorpe after he had bought and renovated the villa and enlarged its park. He placed the well-head between copies of the four columns of the ciborium of St. Marco in Venice.

The parterre in the Queen's Garden in the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, is made complete by a Venetian well-head in Renaissance style. It was presented to the garden as a gift by the enthusiastic gardener Sir John Ramsden in 1958. The owner of Muncaster Castle probably bought it in the 1910s to decorate the park of the castle. The modern iron structure of the well-head was made by Mr. L. S. Grundy and Mr. Holland. The well-head itself bears the stylistical marks of 15th century well-heads: it has a round base and an octagonal top, with large leaves on its corners bending backwards. Between the leaves, on its sides, coats of arms and animal heads can be found.

In sum, it can be established that the fame and travel appeal of Venice had a great impact on the literary and commercial interest in well-heads. By the middle of the 19th century it became an actual custom of the upper classes of Britain to travel to Venice, and purchase well-heads to decorate their gardens back at home. Most of the original relics of Venetian sculpture and later carvings made to order were sold in an attempt to meet the growing demand from museums and upper-class collectors. The three well-heads I presented are newly discovered Venetian relics hitherto thought to have been lost, but now found in English and/or American collections.

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